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ABSTRACT

Many new student affairs professionals have had little or no experience in applying such codes to different learners. How to address issues where codes are insufficient and how to make student affairs professionals sensitive to the moral and ethical issues of adult learners are addressed in this paper. It is not meant as a guide, but as a tool for understanding ethical principles, by looking through the developmental lens of the adult learner. Principles, such as autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity, must serve as the foundation on which ethical codes are based. Each principle, presented here, is outlined and then described as it applies to adult learners and practitioner involvement. Autonomy is important because it shows respect for each person, while nonmaleficence does not engage in activities which run a high risk of harming others. Beneficence fosters actions to benefit others, justice emphasizes the promotion of fair treatment, and fidelity dictates the keeping of promises. All of these principles fit together under an overlying theory of care. Appendixes include outlines of the levels of ethical decision making, five ethical principles, and the four component model. Contains 12 references. (RJM)

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A NEW APPROACH: MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS REGARDING ADULT LEARNER ISSUES

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Running Head: Ethical Decisions

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Introduction: A Developmental Lens

The proposed developmental lens is designed to sensitize student affairs professionals to the implications of their ethical decision making and actions as they apply to issues for the adult learner. When the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards does not specifically address an issue, or the situation contains many components and is highly complex, professionals must be able to focus on levels of ethical decision making (Kitchener, 1986) (see Appendix A).

The first level is called the intuitive level and is based on the sum of the individuals prior ethical knowledge and experience. The problem is that many new student affairs professionals have had little or no experience working with adult learners. The second level is called the critical evaluative level and is divided into three levels of justification: ethical rules, ethical principles and ethical theory.

This paper is designed to address the issues where codes (rules) are insufficient and ethical principles must be employed. Welfel (1990) said that the principles serve as the foundation on which ethical codes are based. These principles include: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice and fidelity (see Appendix B).

MacKinnon-Slanney (1994) said that adult learners who comprise nearly half of the student population have special needs that are different from students of tradition age. This new approach may serve as a developmental lens for understanding the ethical principles as they apply to issues for adult learners.

Ethical decision making involves more that understanding ethical principles and the characters involved. Rest (1986) said that there are four kinds of psychological

processes that must occur before seeing the results of the ethical behavior. Rest's four-component model provides the framework for understanding the complexity of ethical decision making and behavior (Welfel, 1990) (see Appendix C).

For the purposes of this paper, I have only addressed Component 1 (interpreting the situation as a moral one). Some influences on this component are: familiarity with the situation or the people in it, degree of personal danger and susceptibility to pressure, sheer number of elements within the situation, complexities in tracing cause-effect chains and presuppositions/prior expectations that blind people to reason clearly (Rest, 1984) (see Appendix D).

Component 1 of the Rest four-component model provides an explanation of how and why practitioners actions could affect the welfare of the adult learner. The combination of Component 1, Kitchener's identified ethical principles, and adult learner issues provides the framework for sensitizing practitioners for their work with adult learners. It is not meant to be a guide like the ethical codes, but instead a developmental lens when looking at issues for the adult learner (see Appendix E).

Autonomy: Showing Respect for Each Person

The Principle

The principle of autonomy includes two key concepts: the right of individuals to decide how to live their lives (as long as their actions do not interfere with the welfare of others) and the right to freedom of thought or choice (Kitchener, 1995). A sense of individual responsibility must also accompany these rights to ensure respect for the right

of others. The concept of autonomy is therefore one of rights and responsibility, possibly more so than any other principle.

Adult Learner Issues

Adults are generally self-directed learners and differ in their perspective of the college experience from the traditional student, whose main task is preparing for adulthood (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). Most adult learners are already self-supporting and responsible. Their main task is to change perspectives and replace one way of interpreting the world with another (Brookfield, 1986). The concepts of self-direction (the student's desire to take the initiative in his/her own learning experiences) and self-responsible behavior are central to understanding the way that adults learn.

Practitioner Involvement

By understanding the concept of autonomy and learning issues for adult learners, practitioners can be sensitive to the facilitation process of ensuring that adults can act as "free agents". However, even though most adults prefer self-direction, making choices and acting as free agents are dependent on competence in decision making (Kitchener, 1985). Many factors are relevant when evaluating competence (e.g., depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, possible dementia). Practitioner's awareness of the biopsychosocial components in the life of an adult will help in the assessment of learner competence. Sensitivity is necessary because autonomy involves both respecting the right of students and being committed to expecting students to act responsibly.

Nonmaleficence: Doing No Harm

The Principle

Nonmaleficence means not engaging in activities which run a high risk of harming others (Kitchener, 1986). The concept of harm includes both physical and psychological injury, which may occur intentionally or unintentionally.

Adult Learner Issues

Frequently, adults entry into higher education is due to life transition (e.g., divorce, loss of a job, death of a spouse), and many are recovering from previously hurtful situations (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). Transitions require adaptation and often stretch coping skills to the limit. Adult learners are already balancing multiple roles and may be over-challenged on a regular basis (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994).

Practitioner Involvement

The possibility of harm is elevated when students are vulnerable. Understanding the susceptibility to pressure and degree of personal danger is important when interpreting how one's actions affect the welfare of others (Rest, 1984). Practitioners should be aware of the particular pressures of an adult learner and ask questions such as: What other issues besides school are paramount in this person's life? Was the transition into higher education due to a particularly debilitating circumstance? How can I be gentle with the vulnerable state-of -mind that this student is in? Asking these types of questions will help practitioners in interpreting ethical issues with adult learners. Sensitivity to the complexity of cause-effect situations make one more aware of difficult situations (Rest, 1984). As MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) said, "like billiard balls hit by the cue ball, worries at home have an affect on school wok, and a disappointing grade on a

biology quiz may affect relationships with family" (p. 6). The practitioner could react with negativism to the already over-stressed and sometimes demanding adult learner, which could cause more harm. The practitioner could also choose to create a different environment – one of understanding and empathy. This turn of events would reduce the likelihood of causing more harm to this student.

Beneficence: Acting to Benefit Others

The Principle

Benefiting others is the obligation to make a positive contribution to another's welfare (Kitchener, 1986). It involves the promotion of personal and instrumental learning and growth for one's holistic development.

Adult Learner Issues

Renowned psychologist Erik Erikson (1982) described different stages of adult development. The stage, "Generativity versus Stagnation" is a typical stage for older adult learners who express a need for helping the next generation. Adults have a wealth of experience and expertise with which to help; however, many times they feel technically incompetent (fear of expressing themselves on computers), and under-valued in a culture that continues to celebrate the quickness of youth and is unaffirming to older citizens.

Practitioner Involvement

One of the effective practices in facilitating adult learners is nurturing empowered adults (Brookfield, 1986). Affirming adult learners and celebrating middle and older age as another phase of adult development is empowering to adults (Friedan, 1993). Many

Americans hold on to the view of older adults as "going down hill." Presuppositions and prior expectations sometimes blind a person when determining how actions can affect the welfare of others (Rest, 1984). Professionals should remain sensitive to this prevailing presupposition and continue creating an environment of support and celebration. An empowered adult would be better equipped to handle the pressures of school and still have energy to share their experiences and expertise with the younger student population. Therefore, celebration of the adult learner will benefit the whole student population.

Justice: Promoting Fair Treatment

The Principle

Justice means fair, impartial, equal treatment of persons [and includes the fair distribution of goods, services, and rewards] (Kitchener, 1986). Being just assumes that three standards are met: impartiality, equality and reciprocity. The standards of impartiality and equality suggest that equals be treated equally and that unequals be treated unequally. Specifically, disadvantaged populations should be advantaged to the point of "equaling out the playing field". Reciprocity includes giving the benefits that are due, as well as adhering to the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated.

Adult Learner Issues

Adult learners often feel marginal on a campus that cater to traditional age students (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). Some examples of environmental issues that affect the success of adults learning include: Adequate lighting, easy to read hand-outs, clear overheads, desks large enough to accommodate added adulthood weight or pregnancy. Other issues include: child care, convenient class times that accommodate working

schedules, and helpful faculty that aid with "survival skills", and "re-learning how to learn" techniques.

Practitioner Involvement

The ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards, (1993) place emphasis on the crucial aspects of promoting justice by appreciating human differences. Practitioners should be aware that adult learners are one group of students who require different (unequal) treatment in order to make better use of the college or university. Meeting the needs of adults will still not guarantee an equal outcome for everyone; however, acting justly increases the probability that the outcome will be fair. Creating an adult learner task force is one way of assessing adult learner needs. A task force would be able to define and evaluate needs, as well as advocate for change.

Fidelity: Keeping Promises

The Principle

Welfel (1990) noted that fidelity is best explained by the word "faithfulness." Being faithful involves issues of loyalty, truthfulness, promise keeping, and respect. Lying, misinformation, and deceit all deny access to information that individuals need in order to make a free choice (Kitchener, 1995).

Adult Learner Issues

Adult learners with multiple life roles and commitments have only a narrow margin of free time, although they usually have a greater appreciation of time management and a stronger commitment to educational goals (MacKinnon-Slaney,

1994). In many circumstances, serious commitments must be "put on hold ". Adults need to trust that education can provide a pathway to their goals and that their time is well-spent. Adults also typically need direct pragmatic information (as soon as possible) to decide how to incorporate the curricular and extra-curricular activities into their already hectic schedules.

Practitioner Involvement

Professionals are expected to form relationships based on trust and mutual respect (Fitting, 1986). Mutual respect and autonomy is violated when students do not have access to information that they need to make a free choice. Any form of lying, misinformation, and deceit violates the trust in the educational system that adult learners need. Practitioners should remain sensitive to these adult needs of direct, inclusive, and pragmatic information. Professionals could advise students on trends for employment, and share information on course offerings at other schools that might be a "better fit" for the intended career choice. Taking time to question the adult learner about his/her particular situation will help insure that the correct information is disseminated.

Conclusion: The Overlying Theory of Care

The principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity fit together under an overlying theory of care. Noddings (1984) suggested that the one-caring (practitioners) should be engrossed in the act of concern for the well-being of the cared-for (students). If one is engrossed, then one is sensitive to all components of the situations that the cared-for encounters. The practitioner acting as the "one-caring" abides by the principles mentioned above.

This paper is designed to make student affairs professionals sensitive to moral and ethical issues of adult learners. It is not meant to be a guide like than ethical codes; instead, it is designed as a tool for understanding the ethical principles by looking through the developmental lens of the adult learner.

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Appendix A

LEVELS OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

LEVEL I. INTUITIVE LEVEL

(SUM OF THE INDIVIDUALS' PRIOR ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE)

LEVEL II. CRITICAL EVALUATIVE LEVEL

(GUIDE TO MOVE FORM SIMPLE TO MORE COMPLEX SITUATIONS)

A. ETHICAL RULES
B. ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
C. ETHICAL THEORY

Kitchener, K.S. (1986). Teaching applied ethics in counselor education: An integration of psychological processes and philosophical analysis. Journal of Counseling and Development, 64, 306 - 310.

Appendix B

FIVE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

(THESE PRINCIPLES ARE THE GUIDE FOR ACPA'S STANDING COMMITTEE ON ETHICS, STATEMENT OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS.)

RESPECT AUTONOMY:	RESPECTING OTHER'S FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CHOICE OR ACTION
NONMALEFICENCE:	DO NO HARM PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY
BENEFICENCE:	ACTING TO BENEFIT OTHERS
PROMOTE JUSTICE:	PROVIDING FAIR AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
FIDELITY:	BEING FAITHFUL -- AN EXPECTATION OF HONESTY, TRUST AND INTEGRITY

Kitchener, K. S. (1985). Ethical principles and ethical decisions in college student affairs. In H. J. Cannon & R. D. Brown (Eds.), New directions for student services: Applied ethics in student services, no. 30. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix C

THE FOUR COMPONENT MODEL

COMPONENT I: INTERPRETING THE SITUATION AS MORAL

A. BEING AWARE OF THE MORAL DIMENSION
B. RECOGNIZING HOW POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION AFFECT ALL PARTIES INVOLVED

COMPONENT II: DEFINING THE MORALLY IDEAL COURSE OF ACTION

A. DETERMINING WHICH COURSE OF ACTION IS MORALLY RIGHT
B. FORMULATING A PLAN OF ACTION THAT APPLIES A MORAL IDEAL (E.G., FAIRNESS, JUSTICE)

COMPONENT III: DECIDING WHAT ONE INTENDS TO DO

A. EVALUATING THE VARIOUS COURSES OF ACTION FOR HOW THEY WOULD SERVE MORAL OR NON MORAL VALUES
B. DECIDING WHAT ONE ACTUALLY INTENDS TO DO

COMPONENT IV: EXECUTING AND IMPLEMENTING A MORAL PLAN OF ACTION

A. ACTING AS ONE INTENDED TO ACT
B. ASSISTED BY PERSEVERANCE, STRONG CHARACTER ETC., HOW MUCH ENERGY DOES ONE HAVE FOR THE TASK

Rest, J.R. (1986). Moral development: Advances in research and theory. Ch. 1, pp. 1 - 27. New York: Praeger.

Appendix D

COMPONENT 1 OF THE FOUR COMPONENT MODEL: FUNCTIONS AND INFLUENCES

MAJOR FUNCTION: TO INTERPRET THE SITUATION IN TERMS OF HOW ONE'S ACTIONS AFFECT THE WELFARE OF OTHERS

INFLUENCES: AMBIGUITY OF PEOPLES NEEDS, INTENTIONS AND ACTIONS

FAMILIARITY WITH THE SITUATION OR THE PEOPLE IN IT

PREOCCUPATION WITH OTHER COMPONENT PROCESSES

SHEER NUMBER OF ELEMENTS IN THE SITUATION

EMBEDDEDNESS OF CRUCIAL CUES
COMPLEXITY OF TRACING CAUSE-EFFECT CHAINS

PRIOR EXPECTATIONS THAT BLIND A PERSON TO NOTICE OR THINK ABOUT CERTAIN ASPECTS

Rest, J. R. (1984). The major components of morality. In W. M. Kurtines and J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), Morality, moral behavior and moral development. New York: John Wiley and Sons. [Adapted from Tables 2.1 and 2.3]

Appendix E

PRACTITIONER INVOLVEMENT WITH ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND ADULT LEARNER ISSUES

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES	ADULT LEARNER ISSUES	PRACTITIONER INVOLVEMENT
AUTONOMY: RESPECT FOR EACH PERSON'S FREEDOM OF THOUGHT CHOICE OR ACTION	SELF-DIRECTED, SELF-SUPPORTING RESPONSIBLE	INSURING ADULTS ACT AS FREE AGENTS
	BROAD RANGE OF LIFE EXPERIENCES	AWARE OF BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL COMPONENTS
NONMALEFICENCE: DO NO HARM	LIFE TRANSITIONS (DIVORCE, LOSS OF JOB, ETC.)	UNDERSTAND STAGES OF GRIEVING
		SENSITIVITY TO CAUSE/EFFECT SITUATIONS
BENEFICENCE: BENEFIT OTHERS	GENERATIVITY VS. STAGNATION	NURTURING TO EMPOWER
	UNDERVALUED IN A CULTURE THAT CELEBRATES ONLY THE YOUTH	AFFIRMING EXPERIENCE/EXPERTISE
JUSTICE: FAIR TREATMENT	FEELING MARGINAL	FAIR (POSSIBLY UNEQUAL) TREATMENT
	A) ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES B) LEARNING ISSUES	
FIDELITY: BEING FAITHFUL	TRUST THAT THE SYSTEM WORKS	PROVIDE BETTER ACCESS TO INFORMATION
	NEED FOR DIRECT, PRAGMATIC INFORMATION	

Missey, J. T. (1994). A developmental lens for understanding ethical principles as they apply to issues for adult learners. Unpublished manuscript.